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Reform Club

(New York, N.Y.)

Buttons and the tariff

New York City

1888

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BUTTONS AND THE TARIFF.

Manufacturers of buttons, if they have anything to complain of, have all blame therefor to lay to the charge of the Republicans, as shown in the following taken from the *Post* of Dec. 22, 1887: The duty was reduced to 25% by a Republican Senate and Congress and President. But first as to the statement of wages in this business, as shown below the manufacturers of buttons were for some years doing an export trade. Now if they pay such high wages as they say they do (we would not deny it) yet it shows that the greater efficiency of American workmen counts for more in the end than the low wages paid abroad. But as far as their returns to the United States Census and the New York Census their statements of wages paid do not figure out very well. Although their attention was called to this no explanation has been given. The Mills bill, however, leaves this duty of 25% unchanged. The duty on metal buttons is 40% and on silk buttons 50%. The average labor cost is 37% of the product with present duty on the material.

A depressing, low spirited tale told by the *Tribune* the other day about the ruin of the pearl button industry by a change in the tariff in the year 1888 is having a fine run in the Republican newspapers. There were several fine points in this story which seem to have escaped the notice of the admiring editors who have copied and commented on it. One is that if the pearl button industry has been killed by the tariff of 1888, its death lies at the door of the Republican party, for not only did they pass the bill, but they set on foot the Tariff Commission that reported it, and packed the Commission with their own men, putting in the chosen representatives of the iron and woolen manufacturers, the wool growers, the sugar planters, etc. It may be worth while to call over their names once more, viz.: John L. Hayes, Henry W. Oliver, Jr., A. M. Garland, Robert P. Porter, J. W. H. Underwood, Alexander R. Boteler, Duncan F. Kenner. One of these, be it observed, has taken the editorship of the new high-tariff paper in this city. He will have to swallow a great many things besides pearl buttons before he gets through the next campaign.

Another remarkable fact connected with the ruined button industry is that it was so flourishing under a 30 per cent. duty prior to 1883 that it was exporting buttons to foreign countries. In the exact words of the *Tribune* narrative: "The principal mills were located in this city and Newark, N. J., and their products were sold all over the continent and found their way into other portions of the globe." Of course, then, they must have been competing with English, French and German goods in neutral markets. If they could do this, they needed no protection. But in the very next paragraph we are told: "The trouble is that the work can be done more cheaply in Europe than here. This is especially true of that which comes from Vienna and other parts of Austria. France and Germany are also active competitors. In these countries, where labor is cheap, pearl buttons are made in great quantities and shipped into our market at figures less than half it costs us to make them." Now, both these statements cannot be true. If we were able to compete in foreign markets, it is not true that buttons

could be made and "shipped into our market at figures less than one-half it costs us to make them."

There was an obvious want of veracity in the tale, but how far it deviated from the truth could only be shown by an examination in detail. The substance of the story was that pearl buttons were protected by a duty of 30 per cent. prior to 1883; that the duty was then reduced to 25 per cent.; that this slight change in the duty so completely disarranged the trade that, although the button makers were previously competing with foreign manufacturers in foreign markets, the foreigner was now able to pay 25 per cent. duties, and beat them in their own market; that such a flood of foreign buttons came in that the American manufacturers were obliged to close their works, whereby 15,000 workingmen were turned adrift and are now "walking the streets."

A most depressing and low spirited state of things truly, and lacking only the element of truth to become very effective in the next campaign. It occurred to Mr. J. S. Moore, ex-statistician of the Custom House, to look at the trade returns and see how much the importation of foreign buttons had increased since a Republican Congress had struck this blow at the button makers and their workingmen. He found that instead of an increase in the importation of buttons since 1883, there had been a decrease, as thus:

Importations of buttons, not including brass, gilt, or silk buttons, for four years respectively:

Duty 30 per cent.		Duty 25 per cent.	
1880, value	\$3,478,331	1884, value	\$3,139,948
1881, value	2,980,464	1885, value	2,330,752
1882, value	3,647,200	1886, value	3,364,338
1883, value	3,771,331	1887, value	3,469,016
Total	\$13,877,326	Total	\$12,304,054

Decline of importation during four years of the lower duty of 25 per cent., \$1,573,272.

This leads us to conclude that it must have been our *exportation* of buttons that was cut off by the reduction of the duty. How this was brought about no man can tell, since no bounty was ever paid by the Government on the exportation of pearl buttons either before or after 1883. But if there was no increase in the importation, but on the contrary, a decrease after 1883, we are driven to the conclusion that our sales of buttons in foreign markets must have been unfavorably affected by the reduction of the duty. Either this, or the whole story is a lie to cover a fraud. Mr. Moore showed further that the whole number of hands employed in the manufacture of buttons of all kinds by the census of 1880 was 5,825 instead of 15,000, as alleged in the pearl button trade alone.

The fraud intended to be covered by the foregoing tissue of misrepresentations is disclosed in a statement that the pearl button makers will ask Congress this Winter to change the duty on buttons from an *ad valorem* rate of 25 per cent. to a specific duty of "4 cents a line per gross English measurement." Nobody knows what percentage this would be equal to except the button makers themselves. The only thing certain is that it would be an increase upon the present duty, and that, like all specific duties, it would fall heaviest upon the poor.

**END OF
TITLE**